



GROUNDS FOR SCULPTURE:

A place to dream...

BY LINDA ARNTZENIUS

It's spring and Grounds for Sculpture is a riot of color. The birds are going crazy. Snowflake the peacock—all-white from the top of his crest to the tip of his spectacular tail—is strutting his stuff in front of the Motor Exhibits Building. Sometimes mistaken for an alabaster statue, Snowflake is among the delightful discoveries in store for visitors to this ever-changing Shangri-La of Sculpture. GFS is a magic garden. A place to walk. A place to discover. A place to dream.

Elements of surprise are characteristic of the 42 acre sculpture garden that brings art, nature, and spirit together for an experience that last year drew some 150,000 visitors. Each carefully positioned sculpture is transformed by the shifting light of day and the changing seasons. "Each time you visit, you experience the park differently, the sequence is never the same and there's a freshness that comes with that," says Founder J. Seward Johnson.

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Small hidden spaces offer quiet reflection: behind doors, through corridors of trees, around corners, over hills, or behind walls. Interactive sculptures foster musical exuberance.

Visitors insert themselves into *Were You Invited?*, Johnson's three-dimensional life-size version of Renoir's painting, *The Boating Party*; just one of several pieces inspired by the French Impressionists with which visitors can get up close and personal.

"At GFS we try to break down barriers," says Johnson, who believes in separating sculpture from the landscape so that one "discovers" what is to be found. The recent installation showing a young woman in the "employee" shower, a park favorite and Johnson's concept, is designed to be witnessed as if by accident, "to make voyeurs of us all," laughs the avuncular octogenarian who enjoys having fun with park visitors. He can be a bit naughty too, as a number of nudes and lovers testify. Take another look at that coarting couple in the grass, oblivious to the world, in love: Johnson's handwork.

The park packs a lot into a relatively small space and is itself a sort of live installation with theatrical displays of sculpture that deliberately provoke engagement between artwork, artist, setting, and viewer. "The real moment of art is in the eye of the beholder," says Johnson, "that's a moment of consecration; if the artwork has changed a life, then it has done its job."

Educating visitors without giving them a feeling they've been lectured to is part and parcel of the park's goal. "Much of art is designed to shock, to shake up one's senses and ideas," notes Johnson. Hence the two children on the roof of a tall building by the park's entrance, enough to give any parent heart failure and, incidentally, let them know what's in store. Johnson has firmly held beliefs about the purpose of the sculpture park that evolved as an offshoot of his foundry, The Johnson Atelier, and the need for a place to show the work that artists were doing there to prospective clients.

Interviewed by phone from the Florida Keys, Johnson warms to his favorite topic and shares memories of his first public works made for Princeton. *The Newspaper Reader* outside Borough Hall, and *Out*

to Lunch in Palmer Square; and on his artistic battles. "My starting point was a wish to get people back out-of-doors in the early seventies when a crime wave had people avoiding public spaces. I wanted to put sculptures into parks to act like decoys and entice people back to parks." As for battles: "I like a good fight," laughs Johnson, whose first major show at the Corcoran Gallery, *Beyond the Frame: Impressionism Revisited*, was panned by critics, one of whom likened the feeling it gave him to that of riding a Ferris Wheel after eating a sardine milkshake. Johnson relishes the memory, crediting his critic for doing him an enormous favor. "People flocked to the show to see what all the fuss was about."

One of the artist's most charismatic *trompe l'oeil* painted bronzes, a three-dimensional version of a sailor kissing a nurse on V-J Day, involved a battle of sorts. Owners of the copyright to the image, made famous by *LIFE* magazine photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt, refused Johnson permission to use it, so Johnson based his work on another photograph of the kissing couple taken by another



(left) Chief Curator and Director of Artistic Development, Tom Moran; (right) *Were You Invited?*, by Seward Johnson ©2001 The Sculpture Foundation, Inc. www.sculpturefoundation.org, photo by David W. Steele.

photographer and in the public domain. He titled his piece, *Unconditional Surrender*.

As for the GFS philosophy, he makes no apologies for having fun: "Let MoMA tell people what good art is, we will find out what people enjoy."

Johnson couldn't be more pleased with the way the park has grown since he led the team that transformed the once derelict site of the New Jersey State Fairgrounds into a showcase for prominent and emerging artists. Set among trees (two thousand specimens representing 200 species and cultivars), ornamental grasses and thousands of shrubs and roses,

sculptures range from the immediately accessible and representational to the symbolic and abstract, from the monumental to the delicate. Some are playful, some evoke past masters and some are futuristic. Last year, a seven-acre outdoor Meadow Gallery was added. This year sees the opening of an additional 10,000 square feet of exhibition space at the Seward Johnson Center for the Arts.

TOM MORAN: LOOKING FORWARD

The man responsible for overseeing all of this artwork is the park's new Chief Curator and Director of Artistic Development. Tom Moran joined GFS last June after three decades in a similar role at the New Jersey State Council on the Arts where he worked to bring public art to state and federal building projects such as the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Line, the Carnegie Library Civil Rights Garden in Atlantic City and the New Jersey September 11, 2001 Memorial at Liberty State Park. He also had a hand in bringing Ik-Joong Kang's mural, *Happy World*, to the Princeton Public Library.



At GFS, Moran's first task was to achieve the enormous presentation of Steve Tobin's *Aerial Roots* exhibition, which opened in the meadow last October. Perhaps the biggest show of a living sculptor's work in the country, *Aerial Roots* involved 20 flatbed truckloads of sculpture. "I take my hat off to GFS," says Tobin. "Tom is one of the most outstanding public officials in the United States, he has literally placed hundreds of pieces of artwork in New Jersey and I'm delighted that this exhibition opened in his inaugural year."

Moran was gratified when Tobin,



(clockwise from top-left) Samsi ink drawings on rice paper, 2009; Steve Tobin, Welding process; Shaping process; Maquette for Steelroots. Photos by Kasey Ek and Steve Tobin.



whom he's known for over a decade, allowed him to take charge of positioning the artwork on site. "That was a wonderful compliment," said Moran, who is originally from Massachusetts but has made his home in New Jersey since 1977 and lives in Trenton. As a working sculptor, Moran remembers his visits to The Johnson Atelier in the 1980s when the space that is now the Meadow Gallery (and transformed with thousands of wildflower seeds) was a blighted lot. "A GMC car dealership and an Arthur Murray Dance Studio were right here where this magnificent art is now. How's that for land renewal?" he says.

TOBIN: FROM NATURALIST TO MODERNIST

For anyone who has ever been tempted to bring home an *objet trouvé* from a walk in the woods, some engagingly shaped pebble, exquisitely transparent leaf skeleton, or wind-worn branch or tree root, Steve Tobin's exhibit *Aerial Roots* and the collection of his smaller works in the mezzanine of the Domestic Arts Building are a must see.

The smaller bronzes reveal Tobin's fascination with calligraphy stemming from a period living in Japan. "Asian

calligraphy looks like drawing in 3D, it's very sculptural and most of the pieces are infused with it. The character for 'mankind' or 'entrance,' part of which is an upside down 'V,' is in almost all of them."

Tobin's larger pieces express the form and life of their subject in a material that seems antithetical to the organic and there is a shift from Naturalism to Modernism discernible in the two bodies of work. Painstakingly constructed from re-claimed rolled and bent steel pipe, Tobin's "steel roots" range from the human scale to the monumental. The largest is over 50 feet tall. Their abstract forms suggest many things to the imagination: Fire and Ginger, campfire cowboys, fighting ninjas, lumbering animals, or strange alien creatures.

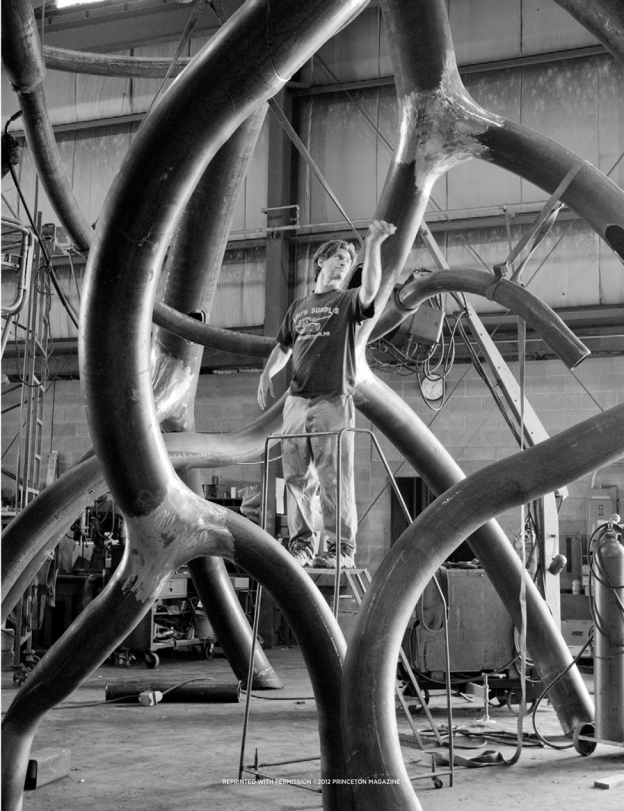
From Naturalist to Modernist is a difference in emphasis, according to Tobin, whose work has been shown at numerous museums and outdoor venues across the country in New York City, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco. "The Naturalist



emphasizes nature over man while the Modernist emphasizes ideas and thought over nature."

Tobin's larger pieces reference Stonehenge, the monuments of Easter Island and the Great Pyramids. "I'd like my work to function in that same time span since it's not designed to be located in the present time period. That, of course, makes it not in the least fashionable, but that's okay, it's on a grander scale in time, in location and association."

Initially trained as a scientist, Tobin describes his work as closer to visual philosophy than art history. After



graduating from Tulane University in 1979 with a Bachelor's in mathematics, he studied glassmaking at the Pilchuck Glass School, founded by glass sculptor Dale Chihuly and others in Washington, and at the Penland School of Crafts in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. In 1989, he became the first foreigner invited to build his own studio in Murano, Italy. By 1994, he was building his first foundry and casting in bronze. Today he lives and works from a studio in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

He is most famous for casting the uprooted Sycamore tree across the street from the World Trade Center in the churchyard of the Trinity/St. Paul's Chapel. During 9/11, the first responders to Ground Zero took refuge there and *Trinity Root*, was cast in bronze from the 80-year-old tree's root system and dedicated on the anniversary of 9/11 in 2005. Another of Tobin's sculptures in the GFS exhibition, *Roots*, is similar to *Trinity Root* but it is not a replica.

"*Trinity Root* was a massive undertaking of 20,000 man hours," recalls Tobin. "It

incorporates the dirt and DNA of that place and I couldn't work in bronze after that." He transitioned from bronze castings of organic forms to working with steel geometric piping. "Instead of appropriating natural forms I'm moving to express ideas," the artist explains. "With bronze, the roots were the destination of intention, with steel the negative spaces are more important than the positive spaces; the steel roots are like bone structure animating the surrounding space which is framed and activated by them." The metaphor of roots is very powerful to Tobin, including as it does ideas of family, ancestry, relationships, history.

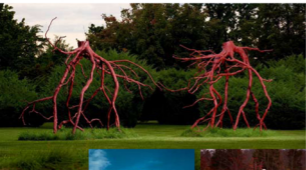
TOBIN AND MORE: BLOCKBUSTER SEASON BEGINS IN MAY

In addition to Tobin's *Aerial Roots* through July 31, several award-winning artists will make the Spring/Summer 2012 Exhibition Season at GFS, opening on May 12, the largest to date. *Camotopia* by the Chinese-born New Yorker Ming Fay will inaugurate the new East Gallery with

a site-specific botanical utopia composed of wire, papier maché, paint and found objects. Running through February 10 of next year, Ming Fay's exhibit will bring "an irreverent style and sense of humor that is much like our founder Seward Johnson," says Tom Moran. *True or False* by the Houston-based artist Sharon Engelstein, *E Phuribus Unum* by Willie Cole, and *Natural Curiosities* by Marilyn Keating, both New Jersey artists, will run through September.

A LITTLE HISTORY

If you are wondering about the names of some of the Grounds for Sculpture buildings, these are leftovers from the site's New Jersey State Fairgrounds days. In the 1920s, the Domestic Arts Building and the Motor Exhibits Hall were built as exhibition spaces. The steel-framed Museum Building, constructed some twenty years later, was repositioned from its former location which has since been transformed into a leafy courtyard. The fairs that once took place here date to Colonial times but by the latter part of the 20th century attendance had declined and the land was sold for development. The last New Jersey State Fair held on the site was in 1980.



(above) Steve Tobin, *Roots and Aerie*, cast bronze, 2010

(left to right) Steve Tobin, *Steelroots*, 2007, steel, white paint, 16 x 13 x 24 feet. *Steelroots*, 2011, steel, white paint. Tom Moran and Steve Tobin at Grounds for Sculpture. Photos by Kenny Ek.



In 1992, Grounds for Sculpture was established as a non-profit that now boasts more than 270 permanent sculptures with plans for more to come in addition to other improvements like theatrical lighting for the sculptures leading to the park along Sloan Avenue and more sculpture leading up to Rat's restaurant (*The Wind in the Willows* inspired Zagat-rated restaurant that offers fine dining in the park) and from Rat's to the Gazebo by the Lotus pond. The hope is to draw more people to the park at night and during the winter months, and to the new 400 seat event space in the Johnson Center for the Arts.

Moran is already making plans for the Meadow Gallery's next installation. He's not giving anything away just yet, however. Chances are it will be something of a delightful surprise. One thing is for sure. Nothing is ever the same at the constantly evolving Grounds for Sculpture. "I don't think it will never be finished," says Moran.

Grounds for Sculpture is located in Hamilton, just 15 minutes from Princeton via route 295 South. For the complete schedule of events, visit www.groundsforsculpture.org. Park hours are 10:00AM - 6:00PM Admission is \$12 for adults, \$10 for seniors, \$8 for students; children 5 and under are free. ■

Steve Tobin, *Steelroots*, 2008, steel, rust patina, 50 x 35 x 40 feet. Photo by Kenny Ek.